

Agnieszka Kiejziewicz

BETWEEN TECHNOPHOBIA AND FUTURISTIC DREAMS. VISIONS OF THE POSSIBLE TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT IN BLACK MIRROR AND WESTWORLD SERIES

Jagiellonian University

INTRODUCTION

The dualism in perceiving the technology on the Western ground, not only as a blessing connected with the rapid development of the civilization but also as a possible reason for the future fall of the humanity, can be dated back to the literary works such as *Frankenstein* (1818) by Marry Shelley, dystopian *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley (1894–1963)¹ or Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927). However, it was no sooner than in the late 1950s when the discourse about the influence of technology on the society appeared in numerous forms of art. The writers such as William Burroughs (1914–1997)², Phillip K. Dick (1928–1982)³ or the techno-prophet Marshall McLuhan (1918–1980)⁴ observed that to extend their perception, sensations and abilities, people cling to technology represented by various devices, what brings the humanity closer to the apocalypse the overused technology is to cause. The inspiration of the findings provided by the theorists in

¹ See: Bloom, Harold, ed. *Aldous Huxley*. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010.

² See: Hibbard, Allen. *Conversations with William S. Burroughs*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999. W. Burroughs, alongside Jack Kerouack and Allen Ginsberg was a distinctive figure of the Beat Generation. He was the author of the novels as, later filmed by David Cronenberg, *Naked Lunch* (1959) or *The Nova Trilogy* (1961–1967), many short stories and non-fictional contributions.

³ See: Palmer, Christopher. *Philip K. Dick: Exhilaration and Terror of the Postmodern*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003. P. K. Dick was an author of the novels such as *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and *Ubik* (1969). In his works, Dick underlined the fragility of the personal identities of the characters discovering the illusions of the world surrounding them.

⁴ See: Theall, Donald. *Virtual Marshall McLuhan*. Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2001. The author of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967) elaborated on the effect that the new technologies have on cognition, as well as how the people extend their perceptual habits by using technology.

the 1960s and 1970s resulted in the emergence of the cyberpunk⁵ genre, firstly in the literature⁶ and later, in the film⁷.

Among the distinctive features of the cinematic cyberpunk, one should underline the appearance of the mass, perceived as a future society of people following a similar lifestyle created by media. What is more, the narrative action takes place in a dystopian city⁸ inhabited by androids⁹ and humans, living together in an apparent symbiosis. The machine as a concept is represented in the cyberpunk iconography not only by the artificial bodies but also by cyber-modifications¹⁰, the Web and the parts of hardware equipment. Analyzing the features briefly mentioned above, it can be observed that cyberpunk as a genre underlines the dualistic nature of a rapid technological development. The iconography, as well as poetics of the cyberpunk works that covers the topics of posthumanism, post-industrialism, and post-nationalism, revolve around the fundamental question of the benefits and threats brought by the modernization.

Cyberpunk and its subgenre – post-cyberpunk¹¹ that appeared after the year 1999 – also influenced the imagination of the TV series directors. Since the 1990s the visions of the modernized future appeared in many Western series as, for example,

⁵ More about cyberpunk genre, see: Featherstone, Mike. *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*. London: SAGE, 1996. The writers interested in the motifs of cyber bodies and the shape of the world “in the near future” created a group called The Movement which popularized and developed the visions of the possible influence of the technology on society.

⁶ Among the literary “fathers” of the cyberpunk movements it is worth mentioning Bruce Sterling, William Gibson and Bruce Bethke who invented the name of the genre.

⁷ Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) is considered to be the first cyberpunk cult film on the Western ground. Later on, the pictures classified as cyberpunk were created, among others, by Robert Longo, Paul Verhoeven and, on the Japanese ground, by Shinya Tsukamoto and Mamoru Oshii.

⁸ Williams, Raymond. “Utopia and Science Fiction.” *Science Fiction: A Critical Guide*. Ed. Patrick Parrinder. London, New York: Routledge, 2004, n. pag. According to the author’s accurate definition, a film and literature dystopia is characterized by four features: it is impossible to escape beyond its boundaries as it devoured all known world, it was created by the external catastrophe impossible to be stemmed by the human, it was constituted by the degeneration of social order and developed thanks to the technological development.

⁹ Rudzka, Magdalena. “Robot.” *Kwartalnik filmowy* 2000, vol. 31–32. pp. 141 – 152. The author provides the complex definition of an android, observing that it is constructed in a way to fully imitate a human being. The mechanical parts of an android are invisible without an intervention into his artificial body, what differentiates it from the robot – recognizable at the first glance because of his metal parts.

¹⁰ The modifications of the biological bodies appear in cyberpunk genre as the cyber parts (limbs etc.) or the modifications of the brain, invisible for the others.

¹¹ Kelly, James P., John Kessel. *Rewired: The Post-Cyberpunk Anthology*. San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2007. As the authors observe, post-cyberpunk subgenre appeared because of the change in perception of the audience that no longer wanted to follow the cyberpunk technology obsessions and the action happening in a gloomy, dystopian world. The most visible change on the post-cyberpunk ground can be noticed in the protagonist’s character – in the subgenre, he does not go against the order and technological development, but he fights for it and tries to improve the life of his relatives, not only accomplish his goal. As the examples of post-cyberpunk films can be mentioned *The Matrix* (1999–2003) series by Wachowski sisters, *I, Robot* (2004) by Alex Proyas or *Surrogates* (2009) by Jonathan Mostow.

Total Recall 2070 (1999), *Almost Human* (2013–2014), *Mr. Robot* (2015) and a plethora of Japanese animations¹². In 2011 British Channel 4 released *Black Mirror* series (first two seasons)¹³ created by Charlie Brooker. The anthology that presents a modern society in the near future or alternative present was passed to Netflix in 2015 and gained even more of worldwide popularity¹⁴. In 2012 the series won International Emmy Awards for the best TV movie and mini-series¹⁵ and later it was also repeatedly nominated for the BAFTA Awards. The satirical and often shocking twists provided by every episode of the *Black Mirror*, as well as a bitter diagnosis of the influence of technological development on the interpersonal relationships, have been well received and praised by the audience around the world¹⁶. However, as an opposition to the critique of the excessive devotion to the devices clearly visible in the British series can be mentioned another picture, created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy for HBO. The *Westworld* series (2016–), inspired by Michael Crichton's film from 1973 and released under the same title, presents the technology as a final form of entertainment, perfectly imitating the real world. Nolan and Joy's TV series has been nominated three times for Golden Globe Award and has won, among others, the Satellite Award for Best Actress (Evan Rachel Wood) and the Critics' Choice Television Award in two categories¹⁷.

Those two series, appreciated by the critiques and award-winning, present and extend not only the chosen aspects of cyberpunk iconography and poetics but also a play with the convention, trying to offer the answer to the core cyberpunk questions. The aim of this article is to analyze the contrasts between the ways of introducing the topic of the possible technological development in *Black Mirror* and *Westworld* series, as well as different answers provided by the two narratives. While the first mentioned picture shows the terrible vision of a future society dominated, programmed and addicted to the technology, *Westworld* presents the carnivalesque world of joy brought by the perfect, uncanny devices.

¹² For example: *Serial Experiments Lain* (1998) and *Ghost in the Shell* TV series.

¹³ "Black Mirror." *All 4*. 16 Dec 2014. Web. 16.02.2017. Available: <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/black-mirror/>.

¹⁴ "Black Mirror." *Netflix*. Web. 16.02.2017. Available: <https://www.netflix.com/pl-en/title/70264888>.

¹⁵ Hemley, Matthew. "Black Mirror wins at the International Emmy Awards." *The Stage*. 20.11.2012. Web. 17. 02.2017. Available: <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2012/black-mirror-wins-at-the-international-emmy-awards/>.

¹⁶ See: Simon, Jane. "Charlie Brooker's second Black Mirror drama 'White Bear' is another work of dark and twisted genius." *Mirror*. 18.02.2013. Web. 17.02.2017. Available: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-previews/black-mirror-channel-4-video-1714613>.

¹⁷ See: "WINNERS OF THE 22ND ANNUAL CRITICS' CHOICE AWARDS." *Critics' Choice Awards*. Web. 17.02.2017. Available: <http://www.criticschoice.com/critics-choice-awards/>.

GUILTY PLEASURES IN THE SIMULATED HYPERREALITY

In *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981)¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard defines the hyperreality as a model constructed from simulacra having no reference to the reality or, in other words, as the ersatz reality built from replicated elements that seems to make the hyperreality more real than its original image¹⁹. The provided definition perfectly describes the shapes of the worlds presented in *Black Mirror* and *Westworld*. The first one in every episode introduces different case and technology shaping the reality, and the viewer encounters various simulations, or also, following Marshall McLuhan's nomenclature – body extensions, determining the actions of the portrayed societies. The creators of the series show a wide range of the visions of the possible hyperrealities, which emerged thanks to the particular focus of the, mostly unknown, influence groups. Here can be found the complete micro-worlds such as the futuristic gym-world in *15 Million Merits* (2012) episode²⁰ and the dark reflections of the known world changed only regarding the influence of a particular device. In various episodes, for example *The National Anthem* (2012), *The Waldo Moment* (2013), *Nosedive* (2016), or *Hated in the Nation* (2016), the reality is also shaped by the importance of the Web and the fast spreading of the information that, as it happens in the cyberpunk narratives, plays the role of the most precious currency. Nevertheless, in *Black Mirror* the hyperreality substituted the real one, making the inhabitants of the presented worlds unable to escape from the settings designed for them. Every desperate attempt of crossing the stated boundaries of the social order is brutally quashed not only by the creators of the worlds that became mostly unknown but by the other members of the communities, still satisfied of their designed existence.

Another vision of the hyperreality, shaped by the high-level technology, is presented in *Westworld*. The creators of the series describe the narrative as:

[...] a dark odyssey about the dawn of artificial consciousness and the evolution of sin. Set at the intersection of the near future and the reimagined past, it explores a world in which every human appetite, no matter how noble or depraved, can be indulged²¹.

Westworld, a gigantic amusement park filled up with perfect androids, designed to serve the incoming guests, simulates the middle 19th century Wild West. The only difference between the splendid creation and the historical realia is that the visitors,

¹⁸ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. S. F. Glaser. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

¹⁹ Taylor, Victor E., Charles E. Winquist, ed. *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*. London, New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 182 – 184.

²⁰ See: "Black Mirror." *All 4*. op.cit. "In the near future, everyone is confined to a life of strange physical drudgery. The only way to escape is to enter the 'Hot Shot' talent show and pray you can impress the judges."

²¹ "Westworld. About. Series information." *HBO*. Web. 17.02.2017. Available: <http://www.hbo.com/westworld/about/index.html>.

while undertaking risky or violent actions (e.g. pistol duels), cannot be harmed. In this case, thanks to the advanced technology, they can fulfill their dreams of every perversion that comes to their minds, being able to mutilate the androids without consequences. In opposition to *Black Mirror*, where the designers of the order remain mostly unknown, one of the designers of the park, Dr. Robert Ford (Anthony Hopkins), appears as a crucial character of the story and the viewer can observe closely the decision processes shaping the hyperreality. What is more, the boundary between the two realities is clearly visible – the guests, entering the train going to the park and changing their attires, enter the convention and start taking part in a consensual hallucination. Paradoxically, the more the visitors believe in the reality provided to them, the more it becomes real, as the creators only give the technological setting, perfect enough to encourage the guests to interact with the androids fully. Here, the surrounding created by Dr. Ford and his mysterious partner is presented as a luxurious commodity only the wealthiest can afford for more than a short vacation²². The lure of the adventure and the illusion of a complete freedom, in opposition to the British series, brings the people into the hyperreality, not encourage them to take out. Even when the situation escalates into a crisis, the quests are willing to solve the mystery, not to escape.

In both pictures the new worlds were created thanks to the advanced technological development of the society. However, it can be easily observed that every episode of *Black Mirror* ends with a bitter conclusion that the technology leads to the subversion of values and consolidates problems such as discrimination, addiction, mind control, and, widely perceived, destruction²³. The message passed by the series can be illustrated by the words of Langdon Winner who observed that:

In the end, literally everything within human reach can or will be rebuilt, resynthesized, reconstructed, and incorporated into the system of technical instrumentality [...]. “Technological society” is actually a subsystem of something much larger, the technological order²⁴.

Following Winner’s disquisition, it is also worth analyzing how the way people use the technology in two series corresponds with creating the technophobic or praising perception of the development. As the author mentions, in its most pessimistic variation, the science fiction genre (and cyberpunk subgenre) shows that the humans, sooner or later, will become the victims of the technological force²⁵. It can be observed that the technological expansion, according to the author, is bound to create cynical and fatalistic thoughts overwhelming humans’ minds. Winner’s point of view is perfectly

²² The price for the stay is not mentioned in the series, in opposition to the film from 1973, in which it is stated that every day costs one thousand dollars.

²³ Dinello, Daniel. *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005, p. 273.

²⁴ Winner, Langdon. *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-control as a Theme in Political Thought*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1978, p. 191.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 275.

reflected by *Black Mirror*, in which the splendid inventions show their evil sides only when used by distorted or malicious people. Here as an example can be mentioned the episode *Be Right Back*, depicting the woman grieving for her late boyfriend who died in a car accident. Under the persuasion of her friend, she decides to use a new, beta-tested software allowing to recreate the personality of a deceased by analyzing his pictures and comments posted on the Internet. The program, designed to help fighting with trauma in the times of despair, when used by the woman protagonist, brings only frustration, as the ersatz lover lacks of free will, thus is unable to fulfill woman's needs of a continued, real relationship. Taking into consideration also other episodes, it can be stated that the creators of the series underline that the technology itself is not evil or harmful but can turn against its creators when wrongly used. However, observing the results of misusing the benefits offered by modernization, it cannot be ignored that the technology in *Black Mirror* is portrayed as a trigger to the darkest instincts of human beings. This statement may be illustrated by mentioning *Hated in the Nation* (2016) episode in which the blissful invention – mechanical bees introduced in the place of the extinct species, in the hands of a psycho-maniac turns into a deadly weapon.

On the other hand, in *Westworld* the discourse on technology, symbolized by androids, resembles the topics introduced in Japanese series *Ghost in the Shell*²⁶. The obsession with the uncanniness of an automatic doll²⁷ that appears in Mamoru Oshii's films and its spin-offs also comes back in the HBO series. The motif of uncanny, widely commented by Freud²⁸ and post-Freudian theorists²⁹, appearing in the American picture in the form of hyper-realistic robots acting like human beings to the extent when no differences can be noticed, are connected to the point of view of the technology presented by the creators. The search for the element that constitutes the soul, free will, and consciousness, undertaken by the androids in *Westworld*, leads to the emancipation of the mechanical beings. Therefore, the metamorphosis from the artificial servant into the aware, loving and suffering person happens because of the faulty assumptions made during their creation process. It can be observed that similar to *Black Mirror*; it is not the technology itself that is evil – it gets out of control because it was designed that way, so the guilt lies on the side of the human creators. However, when analyzing the impact of possible technological development on the *Westworld* society, it can be stated that there are no visible signs of technophobia among the guests of the amusement park. The uncanny dolls are being treated as luxurious commodities, able to fulfill all dark dreams of the visitors. Also, the creators of the androids are rather astounded by the beauty

²⁶ The series contains films *Ghost in the Shell* (*Kōkaku kidōtai*, 1995) and *Ghost in the Shell: Innocence* (2004) by Mamoru Oshii, as well as the list of short series and spin-offs.

²⁷ Brown, Steven T. *Tokyo Cyber-punk. Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 13.

²⁸ Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. London: Penguin Books, 2013 [reprint].

²⁹ Brown, Steven T. op.cit., p. 14. The author mentions theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Samuel Weber and Neil Hertz.

and perfection the mechanical beings represent, not scared of the possible mutiny of the artificial intelligence or wrong usage of it. The *Westworld* park is depicted as the ultimate entertainment, and, what is more, the social need of amusement excuse all imagined deviations of the guests. Even though, as it happened in *Westworld* film from 1970s, as the result of the extended exploitation and the birth of consciousness, the androids come out against their masters, it does not introduce technophobic attitude in the presented society. The need for the entertainment is so great that, despite the tragic events, the amusement park is not bound to be closed³⁰. The *Westworld* series shows that the technology is not a threat – even when it becomes unpredictable and harmful to its creators, the procedures will restrain it and restore the previous order. In this case, the HBO series revolves around the depiction of the technology as a futuristic dream that lures the viewer to project his actions in the highly technological amusement park.

CONCLUSION

Both visions presented in the mentioned series show that the technology should be used with keeping the precautions necessary to avoid destruction of the stated order. However, when *Black Mirror* clings to the cyberpunk depictions of the rising technophobia connected with the rapid development, *Westworld* shows that the creators of the new order are rather safe and the never-ending celebration in the amusement park can last forever, no matter the temporary problems. The uncontrolled machine cannot be released into the world and threaten the society or influence the individuals outside the park; thus global technophobic thinking has no ground to emerge.

As Kelly and Kessel observed in the preface to the post-cyberpunk anthology *Rewired*:

A major cyberpunk obsession was the way emerging technologies will change what it means to be human. [...] The cyberpunks studied the history of how humans have tried to manage change, and were not impressed. Moreover, the technologies of the twenty-first century are invasive and intimate. [...] we are no longer changing the technology; rather it has begun to change us. Not just our homes and schools, our governments and workplaces, but our senses, our memories and our very consciousness³¹.

This quotation can successfully illustrate the way in which the technology is depicted in *Black Mirror*. Referring to cyberpunk vision of the near future, the creators of the series shows the modernization as an inevitable step in the evolution, nonetheless not fully optimistic. On the other hand, it can be stated that the point of view on the technology, implemented into the *Westworld* narrative, resembles more

³⁰ *Futureworld* (1976), directed by Richard T. Heffron, is a sequel of *Westworld* (1973). It shows the development of the amusement park known from the first picture. In Heffron's film there are new, additional "worlds" imitating different eras and places (eg. Spaceworld, Romanworld), however the *Westworld*, after the incidents depicted in the first film, had been closed to the public.

³¹ Kelly, James P., John Kessel. op. cit., p. X.

post-cyberpunk vision. The authors of the sub-genre are interested in exploring the “end of the history” and speculate what will be beneath it³², at the same time they restrain themselves from assessing the impact of the technology on humans. In post-cyberpunk narratives, the protagonist perceives hyperreality at the same time as “a trap, an escape, and a refuge”³³, what is perfectly visible, for example, in the actions of the Man in Black (Ed Harris), one of the most mysterious characters in the *Westworld* series. The wealthy character can afford spending years in the amusement park while searching for the ultimate truth lying underneath the plot created for the regular guests. Kelly and Kessel also observe that the post-cyberpunk protagonists do not fight with the hyperreality generated by the modernized technology – instead of that, they renegotiate their humanity and embrace the benefits they can gain from the new order, what resembles the behavior of the guests in *Westworld*.

Summing up, the presented series play with the cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk conventions to the extent allowing to reinterpret the questions of the influence of the technology on an individual, which constituted the genre. However, while the HBO production sticks more to the post-cyberpunk convention, showing the futuristic technology as an ultimate entertainment, *Black Mirror* shows the dark side of the technological development.

REFERENCES

- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. S. F. Glaser. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Aldous Huxley*. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010.
- Brown, Steven T. *Tokyo Cyber-punk. Posthumanism in Japanese Visual Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Dinello, Daniel. *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.
- Featherstone, Mike. *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*. London: SAGE, 1996.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. London: Penguin Books, 2013 [reprint].
- Hibbard, Allen. *Conversations with William S. Burroughs*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999.
- Kelly, James P., John Kessel. *Rewired: The Post-Cyberpunk Anthology*. San Francisco: Tachyon Publications, 2007.
- Palmer, Christopher. *Philip K. Dick: Exhilaration and Terror of the Postmodern*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003.
- Rudzka, Magdalena. “Robot.” *Kwartalnik filmowy* 2000, vol. 31–32. pp. 141 – 152.

³² Ibidem, p. XIII.

³³ Ibidem, p. XII.

- Taylor, Victor E., Charles E. Winquist, ed. *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*. London, New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Theall, Donald. *Virtual Marshall McLuhan*. Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2001.
- Williams, Raymond. "Utopia and Science Fiction." *Science Fiction: A Critical Guide*. Ed. Patrick Parrinder. London, New York: Routledge, 2004, n. pag.
- Winner, Langdon. *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-control as a Theme in Political Thought*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1978.

ON-LINE RESOURCES

- "Westworld. About. Series information." *HBO*. Web. 17.02.2017. Available: <http://www.hbo.com/westworld/about/index.html>.
- "Black Mirror." *All 4*. 16.12.2014. Web. 16.02.2017. Available: <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/black-mirror/>.
- "Black Mirror." *Netflix*. Web. 16.02.2017. Available: <https://www.netflix.com/pl-en/title/70264888>.
- "WINNERS OF THE 22ND ANNUAL CRITICS' CHOICE AWARDS." *Critics' Choice Awards*. Web. 17.02.2017. Available: <http://www.criticschoice.com/critics-choice-awards/>.
- Hemley, Matthew. "Black Mirror wins at the International Emmy Awards." *The Stage*. 20.11.2012. Web. 17.02.2017. Available: <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2012/black-mirror-wins-at-the-international-emmy-awards/>.
- Simon, Jane. "Charlie Brooker's second Black Mirror drama 'White Bear' is another work of dark and twisted genius." *Mirror*. 18.02.2013. Web. 17.02.2017. Available: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-previews/black-mirror-channel-4-video-1714613>.

SUMMARY

The presented article analyzes the contrasts between the ways of introducing the topic of the possible technological development in *Black Mirror* and *Westworld* series. The first one shows a modern society in the near future, together with a bitter diagnosis of the influence of technological development on the interpersonal relationships, while *Westworld* series presents the technology as a final form of entertainment. The picture, inspired by Michael Crichton's film from 1973, is mentioned as an opposition to the critique of the excessive devotion to the devices, clearly visible in the British production. Those two award-winning series depict and extend chosen aspects of cyberpunk iconography and search for the answer to the core cyberpunk questions about the condition of an individual in the modern society. In the presented article the author shows the opposite ways of understanding the technological development in the series – a terrible vision of a future society dominated, programmed and addicted to the technology and the carnivalesque world of joy brought by the perfect androids.